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Editorial

Gender and (post)colonialism: Locating marginalised voices

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Almost 30 years ago, literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (1988) introduced the notion of the gendered subaltern. She argued that the recovery of subaltern female voices from sources made in a colonial context is virtually impossible, because the female subaltern lacks the ability to speak or be heard, as different interpretations of Spivak's work suggest (Loomba, 1993; Lazarus, 1994; Parry, 1995). Other scholars who have used the notion of gendered subalternity instead claimed that it is possible to trace fragments in colonial sources that offer the potential for unsettling colonial and patriarchal master narratives (Mani, 1998; Joseph, 2004; Chaudhuri, Katz, & Perry, 2010). We align ourselves with these scholars, because we think unsettling colonial discourses is necessary to open up space for alternative interpretations of the past, in which gendered subalterns are implicated. In our view, it is possible to elucidate voices of marginalised 'others', either by reading texts differently via various reading strategies or complementing textual analysis with other kinds of sources. This does diminish the fact that the project of recovering voices of marginalised 'others' raises a range of complex issues among other things because most of the accounts were not produced by the marginalised subjects themselves. This is why alternative readings are essential in recovering gendered subalterns.

This special issue of the *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* deals with the subject of locating voices and practices of gendered marginalised 'others' in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Here, contributions from different disciplines are brought together that all engage with issues of methodology and interpretation involved in retrieving marginalised voices. They engage with the question of what these voices add, and the wider implications of adding a marginalised point of view within specific historiographies and

academic or societal debates. The inception of this special issue can be traced back to an international workshop for colonial historians in August 2014, which we, the two editors, organised to collectively develop our strategies for locating voices of marginalised 'others' in textual and visual sources. Both our own research projects concern a specific marginalised group in the context of colonial Suriname and the Dutch East Indies, namely Hindustani migrants in Suriname and 'Indonesian' agents of the Catholic mission. We aim to make visible the perspectives and identities of these often overlooked groups, and their involvement in historical processes. Not only did these groups leave behind few own written records, but their 'voice' is hardly heard in accounts produced by Dutch colonial observers or missionaries that were preserved, because they are often *spoken for* by Dutch colonial officials and missionaries. What remains of history in the records is a fractured and disjointed picture, shaped not only by the process of writing, but also by the acts of selection by officials, preservation by archivists, and analysis by academics. The stereotyped descriptions of Hindustani immigrants and 'Indonesian' Catholic mission workers that we encounter in our research have been shaped by all these processes, and could have driven us and many of the other contributors to this volume to abandoning their project altogether (Derksen 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Fokken, this issue).

However, we are convinced that the inclusion of subaltern perspectives is necessary to rewrite and rethink the Dutch colonial past. Despite earlier efforts (Gouda, 1995; Legêne, 1998), only at a conference in 2010 did a larger group of Dutch historians advocate the need for the inclusion of colony and metropole in one analytical frame, highlighting how they are mutually constitutive (Bloembergen & Kuitenbrouwer, 2013). This 'New Dutch Imperial History', is a rather late inception of a field of research which was established in the historiography on the British empire from the 1990s (Gilroy, 1993; Burton, 1995; Sinha, 1995; Lester, 2001; Hall, 2002; Howe 2010). Also, in Belgium, this approach is slowly gaining interest (Vanthemsche, 2007; Vanthemsche, 2012). Dutch historian Remco Raben has warned against the potential neglect of subaltern perspectives in this new historiography (Raben, 2013, p. 30). The incorporation of such perspectives is necessary because 'empire' affected subaltern groups differently.

We think that lack of attention for gendered subalterns is an even greater problem for Dutch and Belgian historiography, because of the multiple forms of marginalisation based on gender, race, and class they were faced with. But, also, because colonial projects such as the Dutch and Belgian, were grounded in gendered discourses, policies, and practices (see Gouda,

1995; Locher-Scholten, 2000; Jacques & Piette, 2003). For example, historian Frances Gouda has shown how cohabitation between Dutch men and Indonesian women up until 1900 spawned a culture of sociability that was unimaginable in colonies under British rule (Gouda, 1995). There are anthropologists, social scientists, and (oral) historians who have interrogated the perspectives of marginalised groups such as lower-class Afro-Surinamese women (Wekker, 1994), Asian Women in Malay literature from the Dutch East Indies (Hellwig 2012), or Congolese women (Mianda, 2002). However, the number of scholars engaging in this kind of research is still limited, and there is a lot Dutch and Belgian scholars can gain from questions and methods employed by historians of the British Empire. In this issue, we want to stimulate this field of enquiry by further exploring and developing strategies that can be used to retrieve marginalised voices and analyse colonial sources.

We take inspiration from social, feminist, and postcolonial historians who have developed strategies to write history 'from the bottom up' since the 1960s. Those historians, all working from different research agendas, not only pushed for the inquiry of personal and autobiographical texts, but also developed strategies for reading sources 'against the grain'. For example, the members of the Subaltern Study Group in India argued that it is possible to gain insight into the behaviour and ideas of subalterns through descriptions made by British colonial officials. They encourage researchers to look for first person narratives, contradictions, interruptions, and meaningful silences (Guha, 1994 [1983]). The members of the group tended to apply this method only to the recovery of subaltern men. Ann Laura Stoler has argued for the importance of reading colonial archives 'along the grain' before examining the voices of 'others' represented in these archives. Researchers need to understand not only how and why these records came to be, but also need to determine how personal attachments and common sense informed the drawing up of records. For Stoler, the importance of understanding 'colonial common sense', a core concept in her publication *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (2009), lies in the fact that these shared assumptions go unstated most of the time, but are an important shaping force of the colonial archive. According to Stoler, common sense was buried not only in what was not written because everyone knew it, but also in what could not yet be spoken about or what could not be said at all. Furthermore, considering the personal concerns and attachment of the author can help to pick up on uncertainties and doubts, and thus help to locate different representations of gendered subaltern voices (Stoler, 2009).

Although postcolonial scholars recognise the significance of colonial accounts and archives, there is no scholarly consensus about the extent to which the voices of oppressed colonial subjects can be recovered through analysis of such archives and accounts. Instead of dismissing colonial sources all together, Ricardo Roque and Kim Wagner (2012) propose a constructive attitude to, and critical engagement with, these sources. In order to develop this constructive approach, they propose another reading strategy, which is concerned with the cross-cultural encounters and material practices in which colonial knowledge is embedded. In this reading strategy, colonial knowledge as it is created in colonial accounts must be considered as an encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans. These accounts are considered intercultural objects, thus providing the opportunity to study historical encounters in which both observer and observed played a part (Roque & Wagner, 2012).

Following Roque and Wagner's suggestion, we would argue that, in the light of recent studies on (cultural) encounters, intermediaries, and the creation of colonial knowledge, actual events and practices of colonial encounters should be studied in order to elucidate the role of 'marginalised' actors (Driver & Jones, 2009; Schaffer, 2009; Juterczenka & Mackenthun, 2009; Fabian, 2000). This then sheds light not only on the role that marginalised subjects played, but also on the social matrix in which these subjects are involved, and the type of interaction that took place. This means that, in line with S. Charusheela's idea of situated subjects, we should not only pay attention to the context and situation of colonial subjects, but also look beyond Enlightenment frameworks of agency and consider subaltern women as 'possessed of agency and capable of reflective and purposive deliberation and action from *within* her world view' (Charusheela, 2001, p. 209).

These reading strategies of textual sources, alternative or complementary as they might be, demonstrate the possibility of retrieving voices of marginalised 'others' and indicate some of the directions in which we can critically engage with (post)colonial sources. Furthermore, we think that the different reading strategies can be complemented by analyses of visual and material culture in order to critically engage with other realms of knowledge. Postcolonialism and feminism offer important perspectives and strategies, emphasising the role of gender, challenging hegemonic discourses and constructions, and engaging critically with a multitude of sources, thus exploring marginalised voices, perspectives, and agency.

The contributions to this issue concern both colonial and postcolonial contexts, deal with various parts of the world, including but also going

beyond the Dutch and Belgian contexts, and are written by scholars from different disciplines. This international and multidisciplinary collection of articles reflects not only the diversity of the field, but also indicates the different avenues of inquiry that can be pursued. The intention is to provide insight into how different strategies and concepts from postcolonial and gender studies can or cannot be applied in researching or uncovering marginalised voices, and how they can potentially unsettle dominant discourses. With this issue we would like to provide an additional impulse to the Dutch and Belgian historiography on gendered marginalised voices in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism.

Historian Margriet Fokken observes the absence of female voices in both the available sources as well as the historiography on Hindustani women in Suriname. She makes an important step to turn this tide by focusing on the lived experience of these women, applying a mixed method of reading textual sources both along and against the grain. In doing so, she offers an alternative interpretation of these texts in order to elucidate women's active involvement in community construction. Fokken first takes us along the grain of the Colonial Reports, which describe the state of affairs in Suriname, showing not only the stereotypes they (re-)produced about migrant Hindustani women but also instances of female agency. She problematises descriptions of violence towards Hindustani women in Suriname, as included in the Colonial Reports, and subsequently moves to the issue of self-positioning. Reading the same reports and the records in the archive of the Immigration Agent in Suriname against the grain, she highlights Hindustani women's concepts of family life and sexuality.

Tijl Vanneste, a historian positioning himself in the wider academic context of slavery studies in Brazilian historiography, is engaged with retrieving female voices, or rather, female acts, through an 'against the grain' analysis of textual source material, focussing specifically on the voices of women vendors of African and mixed descent in the colonial project of diamond mining in Brazil. With this focus, he sets out a broadening of the social matrix in which other actors in the colonial project of diamond mining operated. Vanneste uses the 1774 census made in Tejuco as main source, and, in his analysis, he focuses not so much on representations, but on practices and acts in order to locate the agency of those women vendors.

In his contribution, Stijn Heyvaert addresses the question of Belgian feminist attitudes towards colonialism. He takes the historiography on British white middle-class feminists by scholars such as Antoinette Burton as his point of departure, and asks whether Belgian feminists could also be

qualified as 'imperialist feminists' (Burton 1992, 1995, 1999). Heyvaert engages in a discourse analysis of five Belgian feminist journals in the period 1892-1960. He shows how the Belgian colonial project was seen and used by Belgian feminists as a stage for *maternalist imperialism*, *maternalist feminism*, and *imperialist feminism*. By contributing a new case study to long-standing Anglophone research on the relation between gender, empire, and racism, Heyvaert shows why nationalist feminist agendas should also be framed in a wider context of imperialism and racism.

An van Raemdonck addresses a more current issue; that of the battle against female mutilation. She traces processes of the marginalisation of certain voices in the transnational feminist movement, while at the same time trying to make these voices visible. The focus is on the voices of Egyptian feminist activists. She analyses how processes of marginalisation created at the international level relate to the local or 'on the ground' situation by applying a mixed method approach of in-depth interviews and participant observation deriving from critical anthropology. This enables her to show that transnational feminism in the battle against female mutilation is not recognising local activism: when the subject appeared on the international agenda, the ideas of grassroots activists were ignored and side-lined.

The research articles of this special issue are complemented by an interview with prominent lawyer Liesbeth Zegveld about her juridical work for women victims of the Indonesian War of Independence. As the interview by Agnes Cremers underlines, the recognition of the war crimes committed by the Dutch state forms a new chapter in the reflection on the Dutch colonial past; a chapter in which the state finally takes some accountability for its violent colonial past. The many procedures and lawsuits for restitution performed by Zegveld create an opportunity for the victims of war crimes to be heard.

The artist and cultural activist Patricia Kaersenhout contributes a visual essay on the portraits she created of black feminist activists that were active in the Netherlands in the 1980s. Under the title 'Proud Rebels', Kaersenhout presents embroidered images of these activists, some of which are reproduced in this issue. Kaersenhout reflects on how her artistic work was shaped by experiences of growing up in the Netherlands as a Surinamese woman. She explains her disappointment with white feminism and her personal neglect to acknowledge the work of black feminists at the time.

Besides these articles, this special issue presents three book reviews, which engage with gendered subalterns in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The first engages with the question of solidarity and justice across

borders and under conditions of difference and diversity from a theoretical perspective. The two other reviews complement the issue by showing how specific historiographies are enriched by the inclusion of voices of gendered marginalised persons or groups, but also highlight the advantages and risks involved in using visual sources, the importance of contextualisation of case studies, and the question of representativeness.

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